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A Comparative study on perceptions of Spirituality in Henry Vaughn's *The Retreat* and  
George Herbert's *Virtue*

Abstract

James Redfield in one of his article *The Big Picture of Human Spirituality* says, "For all human history, we have been striving for one goal: the spiritual reunification of mankind with God, the divine intelligence that lives within us." It is the apt definition of Spirituality. In context of modern world often spirituality is being confused by the term 'Religiosity.' The paper will try to draw a bifurcation between the philosophy of Spirituality and Religiosity in context of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan's poetry- *Virtue* and *The Retreat* in relevance to the modern world. Spirituality is a belief on the Supreme Being – be it God, spirit, soul or any ultimate power unlike Religiosity- a belief that comes with obligatory rules and regulations and the domination of its rituals and traditions. This research tends to portray that in context of the modern world, everything is an illusion. Human beings are living in a virtual world which is not real. Everything we see or do or believe is been derived from the artificial world. In present time where people are disoriented, there is a need to make them realize that their life in this world is a visitation and their ultimate home is with God. This paper intends to exhibit the need of spirituality from the perspective of Herbert and Vaughan's poetry. The paper will try to bring out different perspectives of spirituality but at the same time will try to deliver that the base of it is belief

in God. The paper will try to give the answer to the question- Is Religion and Spirituality is being followed in its veracious sense as they are meant to be in this disillusioned, unreal and virtual world?

Keywords- Spirituality, Religiosity, Metaphysical Poetry, Virtue, Retreat, Personification.

A Comparative study on perceptions of Spirituality in Henry Vaughn's *The Retreat* and George Herbert's *Virtue*

## Introduction

“Nature holds the key to our aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive and even spiritual satisfaction” rightly said by E.O. Wilson. Spirituality, the very word comes with ample of meanings with different perspectives. One thing in common here is belief. Belief is, that satisfies your appetite for meaning of life. Often Spirituality is being confused with Religiosity- a belief or a feeling derived from a religion, a belief on any Supreme Being dominated by a religion. While Spirituality is a belief without the domination of religion, here a person tends to feel the inner soul of their body as the greatest part of their life. It would be right for a person to regard himself as spiritual but not religious that means the person has the belief on some super power which regulates his soul and it can be found in anything, in nature, beauty, wisdom so on and so forth but not in any particular Supreme Being unlike in religiosity. In Spirituality, you have a belief on your soul, whatever your heart follows and soul accepts with faith, but is not restricted by the ideologies of a religion or any particular Supreme Being. There is no fear while following spirituality unlike religiosity. Spirituality gives you the sense of unity unlike religiosity that has detached people in separate groups for the sake of religion. According to oxford dictionary, Spirituality is “The quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things.”

George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, both are Metaphysical poets. Metaphysical Poets were the poets who wrote about the nature of the universe. According to Oxford University,

Metaphysics is “the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, identity, time, and space.” Something that is beyond physical can be considered as metaphysical such as soul, supernatural beings, spirits, angels and nature. Both the poets belong to 17<sup>th</sup> Century and the product of their time. George Herbert being the later poet of Elizabethan age draws his major influence from the one of the elder poet of his age- John Donne. He inculcated variety of mood both as a Lover and a worshipper. His narrower experiences not just only limited his choices for his matter of poetry but also simplified his poetry. Herbert also had a great influence of his mother on his life. When he was four years old, his father closed his eyes perpetually. From this time of his age his mother became his only soul to which he can look up to. His mother has soldiered their family with Herbert and his brother. She did not get married until the sons reached to the threshold of their manhood. She had always pushed Herbert for church. Therefore, George’s poems reflect him as a worshipper.

#### George Herbert’s Perspective of Spirituality:

As this paper intends to talk about different perspectives of spirituality, George Herbert holds a wider, unique and altogether different perspective of spirituality from his lens. His idea of spirituality relies in the spirit of a human being. George Herbert is also been considered as an Anglican Priest. Considering Herbert as his faith has derived from church, a virtuous Christian soul is an amalgamation of Christian practices such as Sunday services, proclamation of the word, hearing sermons, public and private behavior, prayer and a personal connection with the Supreme Being. The doctrines of God, sin, creation, grace, Christ and the problem of evil and sufferings, incorporated together to build up Herbert’s faith.

George Herbert’s poem, *Virtue* is one of the finest examples that portray Herbert’s perspective of spirituality and his faith. *Virtue* came out in Herbert’s collection of verse, *The*

*Temple* (1633), which he wrote in last years of his life. By then, he had holy promises in the Anglican Church and become rector in Bemerton, England. *Virtue* is a didactic poem written in four quatrains, spreading the Christian message. The word 'Virtue' holds its own importance, "A behavior showing high moral standards." The same meaning is been showcased by Herbert in his poem. Here he appreciates and praises the beauty of nature by using various images like Day, Rose and Season because he sees nature as the mirror that reflects God's beautiful creation. He presents a world beyond our imagination marking it as metaphysical. He addresses the beauty of nature and applauds it but at the same time he makes the reader realize that this loveliness of nature that soothes our eyes and delivers pleasure to us is transient in nature. After giving us a perfect picture of nature's beauty, Herbert suddenly snatches us from that pleasure and drops us to the place where he delivers the truth of transient nature.

According to him everything in this world is momentary; also the nature but there lays the Christian truth, one thing that holds permanence in this world is a virtuous soul. Nothing will be having a mark but a virtuous soul. *Virtue* is a delicately expressed grapple between a rebellion and obedience. It also expresses the conflict of a man between the desire to experience worldly pleasures and the will to surrender to God. Reference to this conflict is straightly coming from Bible. When God made humans- Adam and Eve; he had given them all the rights on this world but had taught them how to keep their spirit virtuous and had instructed them not to eat the forbidden fruit. Having been persuaded by devil to eat that forbidden fruit, they were in conflict between their desire to cherish their tongue with taste of the fruit and the will of the God.

As we see in the first stanza of the poem, he uses the image of a day; exclaiming it to be sweet and showcases the beauty of the day declaring it to be cool and bright. He manages to portray the beauty of this transient living world. By exhibiting the picture of the charming

day he delivers the idea about the charismatic presence of nature in this living world. The day is so enchanting that the earth and the sky that is the mandatory part of this day are in such a harmony that it seems like they are in a marriage bond together completing the beautiful day. Here he personifies the Earth as a woman and Sky as a man. The use of the word, 'bridal' gives us the idea of how beautiful the day seems that it gives a strong imagery in the readers' mind of the perfect amalgamation of the Sky- Man and the Earth-Woman in a marriage bond. As he explains in the lines,

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,

The bridal of the earth and the sky; (line. 1-2)

In the next two lines he uses the imagery of dew in the form of tears. The drops of water that has been submitted on the earth in the form of dew looks like the tears because the beauty of the day is coming to an end. The word, 'to-night' suggests that the day is ending and the night is approaching. So, with that ending, he addresses the day and declares that this is your reality, that no matter how much enchantment you hold in you, there is an end to each and every beauty that lives in this transient world, and he says that the day will die, that gives the reader a strong idea of the transient nature of the world:

The dew shall weep thy fall to-night,

For thou must die. (line. 3-4)

Only the soul that is Virtuous will live perpetually. Then further he addresses a flower, Rose; exhibiting it to be sweet and beautiful. He describes the beauty of this Rose by describing the association of its color- Red, that is also the symbol of anger and bravery; thus it have the power to compel the rash gazer to wipe his eyes. But in the very next line he makes the reader realize that its beauty is transient and its roots are already under the ground that he suggests is in the grave. This again gives an idea to the reader that the beauty of the Rose is temporary

and was always waiting for its end as its roots were always in the grave. And he says that it will die:

Sweet rose, whose hue is angry and brave  
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eyes;  
Thy root is ever in its grave,  
And thou must die. (line. 5-8)

To make his thought clearer and apt he uses another example from the nature to proof his ideology that nothing in this world is forever except the virtuous soul. He then addresses the spring season and uses a metaphor of a box that is filled with sweets to display sweetness of the Spring season. The spring season is just like the box of sweets filled with lot of happiness as it consisted sweet and colorful days in it that makes humans full of life. This season is the time of the year where the surroundings are blooming that adds color to your life and uplifts your mood. Then he also talks about his music that is his composition, his poetry also has its closes. Even his work, his poetry that seems permanent to him also has its closes, its end. In terms of music the term 'close' means the end of the musical note, the concluding part of the music. And he says all will die;

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,  
A box where sweets compacted lie;  
My music shows ye have your closes,  
And all must die. (line. 9-12)

In the concluding stanza he reveals that there is only one thing that will prevail forever and that is the virtuous soul of a person. To make the concept of virtuous soul more impactful and comprehensive to the readers he uses the metaphor of seasoned timber and explains the durability and the existence of the virtuous soul. The wood that is seasoned for the use of humans is much stronger and its endurance is long lasting. A seasoned timber is so robust

that it cannot be turned into coal on burning therefore it never gives up to corrosion.

Similarly, the virtuous soul remains forever unchanged instead of harsh realities of time. The phrase, 'world turn to coal' can also be considered as biblical allusion considering the backdrop of Herbert's life that he was an Anglican priest. As it is written in the bible about the judgment day that the day will come when the world will turn to coal, that implies that the world will end and nothing will be left behind as the world is transient. Therefore, after the end of the world also there is only one sole thing that will prevail, hence 'the virtuous soul.' By 'chiefly lives' the poet means that the soul will remain alive when the world will be no more. As such, the entire poem warns the reader about the reality of the transient world and the death. He suggests that the reader should focus on their eternal life rather focusing on their transient life on earth.

Therefore, the idea of George Herbert about spirituality is as portrayed in his poetry, *Virtue* that according to him spirituality lies in the belief of human's spirit that he calls as virtuous soul. Nothing will stay forever, be it the charismatic day, a charming rose or a lively spring season, everything will go through the ultimate end that is the death. The only thing that is perpetual is the virtuous soul. So, his idea of life and spirituality is that all humans should focus on making their souls virtuous and moralistic because it's the morals and virtues that will make you stay forever in the form of your soul. He teaches through his poem that humankind needs to focus on their deeds that will make their soul virtuous because that will prevail forever and should not involve them into worldly pleasures. A soul is a virtuous soul when it is surrendered to the will of God. So, the appeal here is that human beings are suppose to surrender their life to the will of the God instead of engrossing themselves in enjoying the worldly pleasures and destroying their souls.

Henry Vaughan's Perspective of Spirituality



As the research paper has exhibited the perspective of Herbert's spirituality, it would now present the perspective of Henry Vaughan's spirituality. Being the young poet of Elizabethan age, he also continued the tradition of borrowing the ideas from the early poets of the age such as John Donne. The influence of Herbert's teaching, and other influences as well, operated a 'transformation' in Vaughan and he became a religious poet; but his experience of religion was much different from Donne's and Herbert's. Vaughan has imitated much from Donne's and Herbert's poetry. Vaughan's imagery is from his own experience which he applies with logic more painstaking than convincing. According to the principles of 17<sup>th</sup> century sciences, it suggests that there are so many lights and rays that reach to human beings from eternal law. We are so filled with this refulgence of the light showered on us from God, that until we become blind with this dazzling light, we shall be led by the apprehension of our souls and their powers to the comprehension of the God's eternal light. This grip of light holds the human being in wonder and amazement. Vaughan's contemplation is so full of this wonder and love of God. So the prophesy of the Bible is fulfilled in him, "Wondrously flashed Thy light from the eternal hills, Dismayed were all the foolish of heart." Spirituality is the belief in a Supreme Being that can also be on God but free from any tradition and culture of religion that bounds a person to a certain limit. Here, Vaughan had established the supremacy of Christ's soul on him. Vaughan had fought the Civil war in full Protestant attitude in his youthful days for the sake of the Church and true religion. He gave himself a state of devotion and full meditation intensely. According to him it is the deep meditation that can unite the soul of a human being to Christ. In Vaughan's poetry, Nature plays an essential role that conveys the presence and existence of God in human's life. For him Nature and Christ incorporates together. Nature is mere reflection of God, as it can also be seen in his one of the religious poem, *The Retreat*:

And looking back, at that short space,

Could see a glimpse of His bright face;  
When on some gilded cloud or flower  
My gazing soul would dwell an hour, (line. 9-12)

His idea in this masterpiece of his, *The Retreat* portrays the loss of heavenly innocence that was present in childhood and a strong desire to regain this lost innocence. Innocence is when the mind of a human being is not in the state to decipher between what is wrong and right. A simple example of a small infant can give us the clear idea of innocence, when a child is in his infancy he does all kinds of activity without thinking about the repercussions of that action because he is unaware of things, thus considered as innocent. When a person embarks the age of youth in their life, this innocence withers away from their soul because they start realizing the difference between good and bad, right and wrong that snatches the sense of innocence from their soul making them more clever towards the life. *The Retreat* is the perfect example that portrays the same idea. In the very starting of the poem, Vaughan exclaims in the mood of retreating back to his childhood days by saying that happy were those days of my childhood where I used to shine like an angel in my infancy: "Happy those early days! When I shined in my angel infancy."

Why his childhood was happy and why he was shining like an angel in his infancy? Because that was his glorious time of life as he was very much in unity with God. That was the time when he was away from the harsh realities of life, the rough experiences of life, and worldly pleasures that gives way to commit sins. His first phase of life that is childhood has already been completed for which he is longing to go back, now he has entered into the second phase of his life that he calls as 'second race.' He exhibits the idea that his thoughts were angelic before he invaded the second phase of his life that consist sins:

Before I understood this place  
Appointed for my second race

Or taught my soul to fancy aught (line. 3-5)

Retreat, itself means to remember the memories, going back to the past experiences in mind. Here Vaughan wants to retreat back to his childhood days because he has lost his innocence and wants to regain it. He says that when he is looking back or retreating to his lost childhood days it looks like a very short space, as if the past childhood days are not so far from him and he could still see the glimpse of the God who was there in his childhood who has withered away with innocence from his life. Also when he looks back he feels that he has not gone so far from his innocent days, from his first love that is God because he can still see the glimpse of his God. Infancy and his childhood days are just another phrases used here to portray the presence of the God:

And looking back, at that short space,  
 Could see a glimpse of His Bright face;  
 When on some gilded cloud or flower  
 My gazing soul would dwell an hour,  
 And in those weaker glories spy  
 Some shadows of eternity; (line. 9-14)

By using the images of 'cloud' and 'flower,' he refer here that even the Nature was also the place where he could feel the presence of God in his infancy. But they were the 'weaker glories' because they were just suggesting the presence of God and delivering some shadows of eternity.

Vaughan brings the reality of human vices before their eyes making them realize about their sins and how they have corrupted their by committing sins. He says referring to one of the ideologies from the Bible that human beings have infected themselves by sins; all their senses have been corrupted. According to the Bible, a man commits sin from all his senses – eyes, ears, tongue, action and mind. Thus, Vaughan refers to the same idea that because he has

corrupted his soul by committing sins from all his senses he is unable to experience the grace of his first love, God again in his life that is the reason that is longing to go back to his infancy:

Before I taught my tongue to wound  
My conscience with a sinful sound,  
Or had the black art to dispense  
A several sin to every sense,  
But felt through all this fleshly dress  
Bright shoots of everlastingness. (line. 15-20)

In the second stanza of the poem he displays his very strong desire to go back to his childhood days. He is retreating on his days of infancy and expresses a sense of regret that he has lost his innocence that implies he has lost his first like relationship with his God that he used to have with him in his infant days. He uses the word, 'ancient track' that implies his good old days have passed and are not returning back. He retreats to his past days where he has lost his innocence and entered to the new phase of understanding in his life. That was the place where he was able to see the heaven because he was so close to God, and was in a pure hearted relationship with God without any adulterations. His thoughts were pure, natural and filled with innocence because he was in a deep relationship with that Supreme Being whom he has now left behind and cannot get him or that old relationship with him back as he has adulterated his soul with sins and worldly pleasures. The thought is portrayed here in these lines of the poem:

And tread again that ancient track!  
That I might once more reach that plain  
Where first I left my glorious train,  
From whence th' enlightened spirit sees

That shady city of palm trees. (line. 22-26)

He with expertise of the usage of words explains the plight of his soul that how it is suffering from being away from God. He uses the metaphor of a drunken man and explains that as a drunkard cannot walk properly and staggers on his way, similarly his soul is staggering in the way of life because he has lost that innocence of his life that was connecting him and God in his childhood days. He exhibits a strong desire of him to go backward in his life that is back to his infancy. According to him people of this world are busy in moving forward and achieving their goals in life but his forward move will be his backward movement that will take him back to his first love, God. His backward move will be the Forward move for him because that moving backward will take him forward towards his old relation with God. His forward motion will be his backward move.

These are his desires and his strong longing to retreat back to the same angel infancy. But he suddenly realizes that this is impossible for him to step back in life to his childhood days, nearer to God. Literally because it is not practically possible in physical life and metaphorically because he has wounded and corrupted his soul with sins so he cannot go closer to God. Thus, he expresses his idea that doesn't matter he cannot go back physically because he is in his flesh but he can go back to his God after death because after death he will return to his first form – Dust from where he was sent to the life from God. Again he uses biblical allusion, as it is written in the Bible that man is being made by dust and will return to dust. Therefore, if not in flesh in physical life so in soul in the form of death he will return to his first love, God. These are his thoughts that he beautifully expresses in these lines:

But, ah! my soul with too much stay

Is drunk, and staggers in the way.

Some men a forward motion love;

But I by backward steps would move,

And when this dust falls to the urn,

In that state I came, return. (line. 27-32)

Therefore, this was the idea of spirituality of Henry Vaughan that he connects it with innocent. He makes innocence as the medium to reach to God because innocence is the purest form of human's mind. According to him spirituality lies in your soul that is being jailed in your fleshly dress and until you leave your fleshly dress that is your body, your soul will not find the way to reach to God.

Conclusion:

T. S. Elliot rightly said in his book *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*,

I take as metaphysical poetry that in which what is ordinarily apprehensible only by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling, or that in which what is ordinarily only felt is transformed into thought without ceasing to be feeling. (p.220)

George Herbert and Henry Vaughan has done pure justice in their poetries as they have incorporated all such themes in their poetry- nature, spirituality, angels, God, sins, afterlife, death etc. but there is a difference between their perspectives of spirituality. In context of George Herbert according to his poetry *Virtue*, Spirituality is all about preserving our soul from being affected by the world and keeping it virtuous. According to him virtuous soul is only thing that stays perpetually in this world. When an immortal being dies, he is only remembered in the world by the people if that person has managed to keep his soul virtuous. Again the philosophy of 'karma' come here- the more you perform good deeds the more you mend your soul to be virtuous. By being virtuous he implies the kindness of a person which is free from the sins of the world whose thoughts are not adulterated by worldly things. The crux here is that we human beings will always be remembered for our good deeds, our kindness and honesty. Kindness and wickedness cannot prevail in harmony thus, Virtuous soul is permanent and wickedness, cleverness, anger and the deadly sins of this world is

transient. Therefore, humans need to keep their relationship with God in order to make their soul virtuous. According to Henry Vaughan, the perspective of spirituality is unlike of Herbert's. For him according to his poem *The Retreat*, spirituality is retreating back to one's childhood as it holds all the innocence of one's life which is the absolute phase of one's life to experience God's presence in life. According to him, Nature is the manifestation of God; therefore he exclaims that his soul was experiencing the presence of God even in the nature. Innocence is major in Vaughan's poetry unlike Herbert's poetry where virtuous soul is major. Vaughan through his poetry suggests that the immortal beings on this earth, if once lose their innocence then they also lose their strong bonding and pure relationship with God and they can never go back to that old happiness because they have now wounded their souls with sins. Unlike, Vaughan, Herbert suggests that there is always a way out for humans to preserve their relationship with God by keeping their soul virtuous.

In the present world, Religion and spirituality doesn't hold their value to the utmost. There is an extreme of everything. Religion is being followed by the people without knowing its roots and is following it blindly. Many of the rituals have been made by our ancestors to resolve the problems of the society but as time went through it has been manipulated to the extent that now it comes with fear and burden. Most people are following religion under fear.

Whereas, Spirituality comes with a belief and faith without any burden and fear. The present is the perfect example that displays the side effects of religion. Spirituality has been lost, money and materialism has taken the seat. The purpose of this paper is to make the readers realize of their beliefs, faith and importance of religion and spirituality because more often people are living in disillusion and the only way out to come out of this illusion filled world where nothing is real is God- whether through spirituality or through religiosity.

### Work Citation

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